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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRETORIA 002957

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KHIV](#) [SF](#)

SUBJECT: CALLS FOR HEALTH MINISTER'S DISMISSAL INTENSIFY

REF: A. PRETORIA 2817

[1](#)B. PRETORIA 1021

[1](#)C. PRETORIA 589

PRETORIA 00002957 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Charges d'Affaires Donald Teitelbaum. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. President Mbeki's August 8th dismissal of Deputy Health Minister Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge (ref A) has unleashed relentless domestic and international criticism of the controversial lifestyle and tenure of current Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang. Increasingly, media and critics are shifting their focus to President Mbeki as well, rehashing his doubts about the link between HIV and AIDS, questioning his steadfast support of the Health Minister, and criticizing his apparent intent to ensure that Routledge is appropriately disciplined. END SUMMARY.

THE ALLEGATIONS

[1](#)2. (U) The front page of the Sunday Times on 19 August reads: "MANTO: A DRUNK AND A THIEF." The paper alleges that Tshabalala-Msimang was convicted of theft when she was

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superintendent at the Athlone Hospital in Botswana in the late 1970s. A retired nurse told a Botswana newspaper she testified in court that Tshabalala-Msimang wore a watch to work that was stolen off the arm of an anesthetized patient. Tshabalala-Msimang also was reportedly found guilty of

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stealing hospital blankets, linens, and heaters and was declared a "prohibited immigrant," meaning she was prohibited reentry to Botswana for ten years. The newspaper's sidebar includes a quote from an unnamed employee at the Athlone Hospital which states that, "Everyone here thinks it's hilarious that she is a health minister in South Africa."

[1](#)3. (C) Even more controversial has been the Sunday Times reporting on the Minister's condition of "alcoholic liver cirrhosis," which is given as the real reason the Minister needed a liver transplant in March (ref B) and not autoimmune hepatitis, as reported by the Minister's medical team immediately after the transplant. The paper also has acquired copies of Tshabalala-Msimang's medical records from a 2005 shoulder surgery, which indicate that the minister abused alcohol and staff during her stay. Tshabalala-Msimang

filed a successful motion before the Johannesburg High Court to have the copies of medical records returned to the court.

14. (C) Reports of alcohol abuse are also causing the public to question the ethics of her liver transplant. The Sunday Times alleges that doctors and staff knew she had been drinking before the transplant, even though standard procedure is that alcoholic patients stop drinking for six to 12 months before surgery, and permanently after surgery. Unnamed medical experts claim that given Tshabalala-Msimang's age and condition, she would not have qualified for the transplant and died. The opposition party, Democratic Alliance, has asked the Public Protector to investigate allegations that President Mbeki personally intervened by calling the Health Minister's doctors and insisting that they approve the transplant. The Sunday Times also alleges that Tshabalala-Msimang continues to drink, saying that she was

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seen drinking whiskey "as recently as last week." (COMMENT: Numerous Embassy contacts over the past year have confirmed that Tshabalala-Msimang drinks to excess (Ref C). END COMMENT)

15. (C) Adding to these woes, a consensus report released on August 22 from a 15-member panel of the Academy of Science of South Africa on the impact of nutrition on the spread of HIV/AIDS and TB, effectively discredited the Health Minister's claims that garlic, beetroot, and lemon can stop the progression from HIV to full-blown AIDS. The report states that although good nutrition is a valuable supportive measure, no food or food supplement has been identified in any credible study as an effective alternative to appropriate medications. The scientists conclude that recent public debate on the value of certain foodstuffs and nutritional supplements and claims of cure arising from unproven diets have lead to confusion within communities and among health care workers.

THE OUTCRIES

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16. (C) Opposition parties Democratic Alliance (DA) and Independent Democrats (ID) have criticized Mbeki for keeping the health minister. DA Leader Helen Zille has argued that Tshabalala-Msimang "is not only a political and moral

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liability, but now a legal one too." ID Leader Patricia de Lille has publicly said that Mbeki's allegiance should be to South Africans and not to the minister, and that "we can no longer afford to carry her on our shoulders."

MBEKI STANDING FIRM

17. (C) Mbeki appears to be standing firm, both with his decisions to fire Routledge and to keep Tshabalala-Msimang on as Health Minister. For two weeks in a row, Mbeki spokesperson has told the press that current allegations do not warrant any action or investigation and that anyone with evidence of any minister neglecting their duties is welcome to bring it to the Presidency. On 17 August, Mbeki wrote in his weekly newsletter that the recent criticism reflects unease at South Africa's transition from white minority rule to democratic rule. (COMMENT: Mbeki has used racism accusations to deflect valid criticism of other issues as well, including both crime and corruption. END COMMENT) He also called on the ANC to deal with Routledge according to ANC disciplinary procedures. The ANC's national working committee met and decided on 20 August to ask ANC

secretary-general Kgalema Motlanthe to "investigate"

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Routledge's dismissal. Press reports note that though some are saying the investigation will focus on what drove Routledge to make derogatory statements against the government, others believe that this is the beginning of a probe that could lead to a disciplinary charge of putting the organization into disrepute.

COMMENT

18. (C) ANC succession politics aside, the controversy's overshadowing of other significant events, such as the government's prosecution of former apartheid-era officials and the SADC summit, illustrates just how relevant the struggle against HIV/AIDS is to the majority of South Africans. It is unclear, however, whether Mbeki will be swayed. This is not the first time Mbeki has come under fire for retaining the Health Minister. For Mbeki, it is probably just as risky politically to fire Tshabalala-Msimang, who is Zulu, whose husband is ANC Treasurer, and who has obviously built a power base through her cabinet-level positions over the past decade, as it is to keep her.
Teitelbaum